



Ella on the Outside

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Editor's Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

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Girls can be very unkind,? says Mrs Reynolds, Ella?s elderly childminder, who fills the post-school gap until Mum gets home from work. Ella is in tears. She is indeed the victim of some orchestrated bullying at her new school, but it?s worse than that. Her problem is that ?the unkind person was me?. In her efforts to gain entry to the in-crowd swarming around the popular Lydia Sheridan, she?s betrayed the trust of a lonely classmate ? the only girl in her class with the makings of a real friend.

Everything?s a mess. She?s got scratchy eczema all over her arms and hands, her family has had to move house to a new town (that was her Dad?s fault) and her new school is nowhere near as friendly as her last one. Her best friend from her old life ignores most of her texts, and when she does reply she goes on about some new friend she?s made. Ella?s little brother Jack is a constant pain and Mum seems too busy worrying about Jack being okay to give Ella any time. Mum says she mustn?t talk to anyone about The Family Secret; but she has. We?re in the know because, between each chapter recording Ella?s rough ride at school, we read the letters she?s writing regularly to her Dad; he?s in prison, doing three years for stealing money from the bank where he worked.

Cath Howe keeps her cast small and the focus tight in her debut novel for young readers. Ella?s perspective and language are just right for the ages of Howe?s fictional characters and her readers. She teaches in London primary schools and she is surely a discerning watcher and listener. When you are navigating Year Five or Six, especially if you?re new to a school, it can feel as though you are always going to be on the outside; the others will *never* let you in. Ella longs to change that. Her Mum?s been too stressed to buy Ella a new uniform, so every day, all day, it?s evident she doesn?t belong. Her only consolation is that Grandma has sent her an iPhone with a great camera; she?s enjoying using that, especially when the teacher who runs the Art Club admires the composition of one of her shots and tells her, ?You?re a photographer?.

Ella has been ensnared by the malicious Lydia. If she?d like to be admitted to the charmed circle of favourites, Lydia tells Ella she must spy on Molly who chooses to sit, silent and alone, at the back of the class. Ella is sufficiently miserable to swallow the bait, and sneaks inside Molly?s mysterious house. It?s like a crazy junk shop. Wardrobes, chairs, sculptures, jugs, a rocking-horse, baskets of clothes are piled everywhere. The place is damp and it smells. In one of the darkest rooms, Ella hears the sound of ?a little breathy voice? and glimpses ?a pale face with a dark cloak

wrapped round?. She records the scene on her camera and fires the images off to Lydia. When Molly discovers the betrayal, Ella?s world caves in.

As the secrets unfold, Lydia?s own frailties emerge, explaining the heartless mind-games she uses to control others and preserve her own power. With the help and renewed trust offered by Molly ? whose needs are as urgent as her own - Ella learns to recognise the strength of being a watcher, content that she?s ?still a pair person really?. She?s seen the deceptive glamour of the group for what it is. In her growing awareness, she?s even able to help her lonely Mum to begin to repair her life with Dad. Girls are the likely readers here and the novel offers them a reflective read exploring territory which may well have features they recognise.

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